

## Art of Africa in the Modern Era



**29-1 • Attributed to Kojo Bonsu FINIAL OF A SPEAKER'S STAFF (OKYEAME POMA)**  
Ghana. Ashanti culture, 1960s–1970s. Wood and gold, height 11¼" (28.57 cm).  
Gold of Africa Barbier-Mueller Museum.

# Art of Africa in the Modern Era

Political power is like an egg, says an Ashanti proverb. Grasp it too tightly and it will shatter in your hand; hold it too loosely and it will slip from your fingers. Whenever the *okyeame* (spokesman) for one twentieth-century Ashanti ruler was conferring with that ruler or communicating the ruler's words to others, he held a staff with this symbolic caution on the use and abuse of power prominently displayed on the gold-leaf-covered finial (**FIG. 29-1**). Since about 1900 these advisors have carried staffs of office such as the one pictured here. The carved figure at the top illustrates a story that may have multiple meanings when told by a witty owner. This staff was probably carved in the 1960s or 1970s by Kojo Bonsu. The son of Osei Bonsu (1900–1976), a famous carver, Kojo Bonsu lives in the Ashanti city of Kumasi and continues to carve prolifically.

A staff or scepter is a nearly universal symbol of authority and leadership. Today in many colleges and universities a ceremonial mace is still carried by the leader of an academic procession, and it is often placed in front of the speaker's lectern, as a symbol of the speaker's authority. The Ashanti spokesmen who carry their image-topped staffs are part of this widespread tradition.

Since the fifteenth century, when the first Europeans explored Africa, objects such as this staff have been shipped back to Western collections and museums, where they were initially enjoyed as marvelous curiosities, and later catalogued as ethnographic artifacts of “primitive cultures.” Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, changes in Western thinking about African culture gradually led more and more people to appreciate the inherent aesthetic qualities of these unfamiliar objects and at last to embrace them fully as art. In recent years the appreciation of traditional African arts has been further enhanced through the exploration of their meaning from the point of view of the people who made and first experienced them.

If we are to understand African art such as this staff on its own terms, we must envision it out of the glass case of the museum where we usually encounter it, and playing its vital role in a human community. Indeed, this is true of any work of art produced anywhere in the world. When we recognize in an artwork the true expression of values and beliefs, our imaginations can allow us to cross a bridge to understanding.

## LEARN ABOUT IT

**29.1** Explore the variety of styles, media, and techniques used by artists across Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**29.2** Understand the themes and symbols used in African societal rituals of leadership, initiation, divination, and death.

**29.3** Evaluate the role of masquerade in African rites of passage such as initiation and funeral rituals.

**29.4** Examine the relationship of African arts to the colonial experience.

## TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

The second-largest continent in the world, Africa is a land of enormous diversity (MAP 29-1). Geographically, it ranges from vast deserts to tropical rainforest, from flat grasslands to spectacular mountains and dramatic rift valleys. Cultural diversity in Africa is equally impressive. More than 1,000 African languages have been identified and grouped into five major linguistic families. Various languages represent unique cultures, with their own history, customs, and art forms.

Before the nineteenth century, the most important outside influence to pervade Africa had been the religious culture of Islam, which spread gradually and largely peacefully through much of west Africa and along the east African coast (see “Foundations of African Cultures,” page 885). The modern era, in contrast, begins with the European exploration during the nineteenth century and subsequent colonization of the African continent, developments that brought traditional African societies into sudden and traumatic

contact with the “modern” world that Europe had largely created.

European ships first visited sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth century. For the next several hundred years, however, European contact with Africa was almost entirely limited to coastal areas, where trade, including the tragic slave trade, was carried out. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, over 10 million slaves were taken from Africa to colonies in North and South America and the Caribbean islands. Countries that participated in the Atlantic slave trade included Great Britain, Portugal, France, Spain, Denmark, Holland, and the United States.

During the nineteenth century, as the slave trade was gradually eliminated, European explorers began to investigate the unmapped African interior in earnest. They were soon followed by Christian missionaries, whose reports excited popular interest in the continent. Drawn by the potential wealth of Africa’s natural resources, European governments began to seek territorial concessions from African rulers. Diplomacy soon gave way to force, and toward the end of the century competition among rival European powers fueled the so-called Scramble for Africa, during which England,

France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Portugal raced to lay claim to whatever part of the continent they could. By 1914 virtually all of Africa had fallen under colonial rule.

Public and private collections of African art grew rapidly in size during this period. This was due not only to geographic exploration and colonial expansion, but also to the development of anthropology as a field of study. Artifacts from various African cultures became instruments through which university professors and museum curators could explain human development in purely evolutionary terms. Museums and collectors competed with one another to collect everywhere and as quickly as possible, believing that “traditional” African cultures were being rapidly altered by the colonial experience. As territory was subsumed under European control, vast quantities of art objects flowed into European city, state, and national collections.

Objects also entered Western collections through conflict. For example, when a British expedition headed by the newly appointed Acting Council-General, James Phillips, embarked on a mission to discuss the trade agreement with the *oba* of Benin City, he was told he could not meet with the king because he was engaged in an important annual ceremony honoring his ancestors. Phillips refused to postpone his visit and the expedition was attacked, without the king’s knowledge, by a group headed by two chiefs; all but two expedition members were killed. A punitive expedition was launched in



29-2 • MEMBERS OF THE BRITISH PUNITIVE EXPEDITION IN THE BENIN PALACE IN 1897 WITH OBJECTS FROM THE ROYAL TREASURY





**MAP 29-1 • PRESENT-DAY AFRICA**

The vast continent of Africa is home to over 50 countries and innumerable cultures.

1897 by the British (**FIG. 29-2**) which resulted the destruction of much of the town, including the palace, and the seizing of over 2,000 antiquities—nearly the entire store of artifacts from the royal palace. The king was deposed and sent into exile, and his successor only assumed the throne in 1914. The antiquities were taken to Europe and auctioned to defray the costs of the expedition and provide pensions for those who had been ambushed or their survivors. These objects are now dispersed in museums and private collections throughout the world.

Changes in Western thinking about art gradually led people to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of African “artifacts” and finally to embrace them fully as art. The earliest collections of African art were, for the most part, acquired by museums of natural history or ethnography, which exhibited the works as curious artifacts of “primitive” cultures. By the latter half of the twentieth century, art museums, both in Africa and in the West, began to collect African

art seriously and methodically. Today, these collections afford us a rich sampling of African art created for the most part in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the years following World War I, nationalistic movements resisting European incursion arose across Africa. Their leaders generally did not advocate a return to earlier forms of political organization but rather demanded the transformation of colonial divisions into modern nation-states governed by Africans. From the 1950s through the mid 1970s, one colony after another gained its independence, and the present-day map of Africa took shape. Today, the continent is composed of over 50 independent countries.

While African societies were profoundly disrupted during the colonial period, numerous tribal or ethnic-based societies persist, both within and across contemporary political borders, and art continues to play a vital role in the spiritual and social life of the community. This chapter explores African art in light of how



### 29-3 • NANKANI COMPOUND

Sirigu, Ghana. 1972.

Among the Nankani people, creating living areas is a cooperative but gender-specific project. Men build the structures, women decorate the surfaces. The structures are also gendered. The round dwellings shown here are women's houses located in an interior courtyard; men occupy rectangular flat-roofed houses. The bisected lozenge design on the dwelling to the left is called *zalanga*, the name for the braided sling that holds a woman's gourds and most treasured possessions.

it addresses some of the fundamental concerns of human existence. Works of art are often directly related to the commemoration of significant rites of passage such as procreation and birth, initiation to adulthood, socialization in adult life, and death. While political leaders throughout the world use art to express their authority and status, in Africa community leaders are thought to connect the living community with the spirit world. In this regard, African art often especially idealizes the spirits of community leaders and deceased persons, who are expected to mediate between the temporal and supernatural worlds to help achieve well-being both for themselves and for the entire community. In these contexts, art is often intended to help mediate aid and support from a supernatural world of ancestors and other spirit forces. These concerns—rather than geographical region or time frame—form the backdrop against which we look at artworks in this chapter, as African art can be more fully understood within contexts of production and use.

Generally, the full meaning of traditional works of art can only be realized in the context of their use. For instance, when masked dancers perform within a specific ceremonial event, the mask itself—which we generally see isolated as an artwork in a museum—is only one part of a temporal process that most fully reveals its meaning in performance.

### DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE

Shelter is a basic human concern, yet, as we have seen, different cultures approach its design and construction in different ways, ways that often help us understand cultural values and priorities. The farming communities of the Nankani people in the border area between Burkina Faso and Ghana, in west Africa, have developed a distinctive painted architecture. The earthen buildings of their walled compounds are low and single-storied, with either conical roofs or flat roofs that form terraces. Each compound is surrounded by a defensive wall with a single entrance on the west side. Each building inside the enclosure is arranged so that it has a direct view of the entrance. Some buildings are used only by men, others only by women. For example, Nankani men are in charge of the ancestral shrine near the entrance of the compound, the corral for cattle, and the granary; they have rectangular houses. The inner courtyards, outdoor kitchen, and round houses are women's areas (**FIG. 29-3**). Men build the compound; women paint the buildings inside and out.

The women decorate the walls with horizontal molded ridges called *yidoor* (“rows in a cultivated field”) and long eye (“long life”), to express good wishes for the family. They paint the walls with rectangles and squares divided diagonally to create triangular patterns that contrast with the curvature of the walls. The painted

Africa was the site of one of the great civilizations of the ancient world: Egypt developed along the fertile banks of the Nile River during the fourth millennium BCE and endured for 3,000 years. Egypt's rise coincided with the emergence of the Sahara—now the largest desert in the world—from the formerly lush grasslands of northern Africa. Some of the oldest-known African art, images inscribed and painted in the mountains of the central Sahara beginning around 8000 BCE, bear witness to this gradual transformation and how it affected the lives of the pastoral peoples who once lived in the region.

As the grassland dried up, its populations migrated in search of pasture and arable land. Many probably made their way to the Sudan, the broad band of savanna south of the Sahara. During the sixth century BCE, knowledge of iron smelting spread across the Sudan, enabling larger and more complex societies to emerge, including the ironworking Nok culture, which arose in present-day Nigeria around 500 BCE and lasted until about 200 CE. Terra-cotta figures created by Nok artists are the earliest-known sculpture from sub-Saharan Africa.

Farther south, in present-day Nigeria, a remarkable culture developed in the city of Ife, which rose to prominence around 800 CE. There, from roughly 1000 to 1400, a tradition of naturalistic sculpture in bronze and terra cotta flourished. Ife was, and remains, the sacred city of the Yoruba people. According to legend, Ife artists brought the techniques of bronze casting to the kingdom of Benin, and from 1170 to the present century, Benin artists in the service of the court created numerous works

in bronze, at first in the naturalistic style of Ife, then in an increasingly stylized and elaborate manner.

With the Arab conquest of North Africa during the seventh and eighth centuries, Islamic travelers and merchants became regular visitors to the Sudan. Largely through their writings, we know of the powerful west African empires of Ghana and Mali, which flourished successively from the fourth through the sixteenth centuries along the great bend in the Niger River. Both grew wealthy by controlling the flow of African gold and forest products into the lucrative trans-Saharan trade. The city of Jenné, in Mali, served not only as a commercial hub but also as a prominent center of Islam.

Meanwhile, since before the Common Era, peoples along the coast of east Africa had participated in a maritime trade network that ringed the Indian Ocean and extended east to the islands of Indonesia. Over time, trading centers arose along the coastline, settled by Arab, Persian, and Indian merchants as well as Africans. By the thirteenth century these settlements were important port cities, and a new language, Swahili, had developed from the longtime mingling of Arabic with local African languages. Peoples of the interior organized extensive trade networks to funnel goods to these ports. From 1000 to 1500 many of these interior routes were controlled by the Shona people from Great Zimbabwe. The extensive stone palace compound there stood in the center of a city of 10,000 people at its height. Numerous cities and kingdoms, often of great wealth and opulence, greeted the astonished eyes of the first European visitors to Africa at the end of the fifteenth century.

patterns are called braided sling, broken pottery, broken gourd, and sometimes, since the triangular motifs can be seen as pointing up or down, they are called filed teeth. The same geometric motifs are used on pottery and baskets, and for scarification of the skin. When people decorate themselves, their homes, and their possessions with the same patterns, art serves to enhance cultural identity.

## CHILDREN AND THE CONTINUITY OF LIFE

Among the most fundamental of human concerns is the continuation of life from one generation to the next. In some African societies children are especially important: Not only do they represent the future of the family and the community, but they also provide a form of “social security,” guaranteeing that parents will have someone to care for them when they are old.

In the often harsh and unpredictable climates of Africa, human life can be fragile. In some areas half of all infants die before the age of 5, and the average life expectancy may be as low as 40 years. In these areas women bear many children in hopes that at least a few will survive into adulthood, and failure to have children is a disaster for a wife, her husband, and her husband's lineage. Women who have had difficulty bearing children appeal for help with special offerings or prayers, often involving the use of art.

**YORUBA TWIN FIGURES** The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria have one of the highest rates of twin births in the world. The birth of twins is a joyful occasion, yet it is troubling as well, for twins are more delicate than single babies, and one or both may well die. Many African peoples believe that a dead child continues its life in a spirit world and that the parents' care and affection may reach it there, often through the medium of art. When a Yoruba twin dies, parents often consult a diviner, a specialist in ritual and spiritual practices, who may tell them that an image of a twin (*ere ibejì*) must be carved to serve as a dwelling place for the deceased twin's spirit (**FIG. 29-4**).

When the image is finished, the mother brings the artist gifts. Then, carrying the figure as she would a living child, she dances home accompanied by the singing of neighborhood women. She places the figure in a shrine in her bedroom and lavishes care upon it, feeding it, dressing it with beautiful textiles and jewelry, anointing it with cosmetic oils. The Yoruba believe that the spirit of a dead twin, thus honored, is appeased and will look with favor on the surviving family members.

The twins here are female. They may be the work of the Yoruba artist Akiode, who died in 1936. Like most objects that Africans produce to encourage the birth and growth of children, the figures emphasize health and well-being. They have beautiful, glossy surfaces to suggest that they are well fed, as well as marks of





**29-4 • TWIN FIGURES (ERE IBEJI)**

Nigeria. Yoruba culture, 20th century. Wood, height 77 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (20 cm). The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City. The Stanley Collection (x1986.489 and x1986.488)

As with other African sculpture, patterns of use result in particular signs of wear. The facial features of *ere ibeji* are often worn down or even obliterated by repeated feedings and washings. Camwood powder applied as a cosmetic builds to a thick crust in areas that are rarely handled, and the blue indigo dye regularly applied to the hair eventually builds to a thin layer of color.

adulthood, such as elaborate hairstyles and scarification patterns, that will one day be achieved. They represent hope for the future, for survival, and for prosperity.

**CHILDREN, ART, AND PERFORMANCE** In sub-Saharan Africa, as elsewhere, children from an early age are intensely interested in adult roles and activities, including art making and the performative arts. In many societies a child's link to a particular artistic or craft activity is fixed. For example, in Africa, wood carving is universally a male-dominated activity, while women are most often involved in pottery production, and individual children may be apprenticed to a wood carver or potter according to their gender. But, even beyond such formal apprenticeships, children are especially interested in the festive activities of community life, such as masquerade. While mask making and masquerade performance are usually controlled by adult associations, children are given space at the edges of events to experiment with their home-made masks and costumes. Yoruba masquerades such as Gelede or Egungun are often organized so that children perform first (FIG.

29-5). Some families even purchase or make elaborate costuming for their children in a similar style to that worn by adults. Adults view these early forays into masquerade as a training ground. As children perform, they are encouraged and gently corrected from the sidelines by family members. The Yoruba of Nigeria, especially, place a significant value on the training of children in adult performance and aesthetic forms, and children are encouraged to perform from an early age.

**INITIATION**

In contemporary North America, initiation into the adult world is extended over several years and punctuated by numerous rites, such as being confirmed in a religion, earning a driver's license, and graduating from high school. These steps all involve acquiring the knowledge society deems appropriate and accepting the corresponding responsibilities. In other cultures, initiation can take other forms. The acquisition of knowledge can be supplemented



**29-5 • ELDER GUIDING SMALL BOY IN EGUNGUN PERFORMANCE WHILE ADULT EGUNGUN PERFORMER LOOKS ON**

Nigeria. Yoruba culture, 1986. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archive, Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal Collection (1992-028-02691)

by trials of endurance to prove that candidates are equal to the responsibilities of adult life.

**MASKS OF BWA INITIATION** The Bwa people of central Burkina Faso initiate young men and women into adulthood following the onset of puberty. The initiates are first separated from younger playmates by being “kidnapped” by older relatives, though their disappearance is explained in the community by saying that they have been devoured by wild beasts. The initiates remove their clothing and sleep on the ground without blankets. Isolated from the community, they are instructed about the world of nature spirits and about the masks that represent them. They learn of the spirit each mask represents, and they memorize the story of each spirit’s encounter with the founding ancestors of the clan. They also learn how to construct costumes from hemp to be worn with the masks, and they learn the songs and instruments that accompany the masks in performance. Only boys wear each mask in turn and learn the dance steps that express the character and personality each mask represents. Returning to the community, the initiates display their new knowledge in a public ceremony. Each boy performs with one of the masks, while the girls sing the accompanying songs. At the end of the mask ceremony

the young men and young women rejoin their families as adults, ready to marry, to start farms, and to begin families of their own.

Most Bwa masks depict spirits that have taken an animal form, such as crocodile, hyena, hawk, or serpent. Others represent spirits in human form. Among the most spectacular masks, however, are those that represent spirits that have taken neither human nor animal form. Crowned with tall, narrow planks (FIG. 29-6), these masks are covered in abstract patterns that are easily recognized by the initiated. The white crescent at the top represents the quarter moon, under which the initiation is held. The white triangles below represent bull roarers—sacred sound-makers that are swung around the head on a long cord to recreate spirit voices. The large central X represents the scar that every initiated Bwa bears as a mark of devotion. The horizontal zigzags at the bottom represent the path of the ancestors and symbolize adherence to ancestral ways. That the path is difficult to follow is clearly conveyed. The curving red hook that projects in front of the face is said to represent the beak of the hornbill, a bird associated with the supernatural world and believed to be an intermediary between the living and the dead. The mask thus proudly announces the initiate’s passage to adulthood while encoding secrets of initiation in abstract symbols of proper moral conduct.



**29-6 • FIVE MASKS IN PERFORMANCE**

Dossi, Burkina Faso. Bwa culture, 1984. Wood, mineral pigments, and fiber, height approx. 7' (2.13 m).

The Bwa have been making and using such masks since well before Burkina Faso achieved its independence in 1960. We might assume their use is centuries old, but in this case, the masks are a comparatively recent innovation. The elders of the Bwa family who own these masks state that they, like all Bwa, once followed the cult of the spirit of Do, who is represented by masks made of leaves. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Bwa were the targets of slave raiders from the north and east. Their response to this new danger was to acquire wooden masks from their neighbors, for such masks seemed a more effective and powerful way of communicating with spirits who could help them. Thus, faced with a new form of adversity, the Bwa sought a new tradition to cope with it.

 **Watch** a video of the Bwa masks in a performance on [myartslab.com](https://myartslab.com)





**29-7 • TEMNE NOWO MASQUERADE  
WITH ATTENDANTS**

Sierra Leone. 1980.

### INITIATION TO WOMANHOOD IN WEST AFRICA

Among the Mende, Temne, Vai, and Kpelle peoples of Sierra Leone, the initiation of girls into adulthood is organized by a society of older women called Sande or Bondo. The initiation culminates with a ritual bath in a river, after which the initiated return to the village. At the ceremony, the Sande women wear black gloves and stockings, black costumes of shredded raffia fibers that cover the entire body, and black masks called *nowo* or *sowei* (FIG. 29-7).

With its glossy black surface, high forehead, elaborately plaited hairstyle decorated with combs, and refined facial features, the mask represents ideal female beauty. The mask is worn by a senior member of the women's Sande society whose responsibility it is to prepare Sande girls for their adult roles in society, including marriage and child rearing. The meanings of the mask are complex. It has been related to the chrysalis of a certain African butterfly, with the creases at the base of the mask representing its body segments. Thus, the young woman entering adulthood is like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. The comparison extends even further, for just as the butterfly feeds on the toxic sap of

the milkweed to make itself poisonous to predatory birds, so the medicinal powers of the Sande society are believed to protect the young women from danger. The creases may additionally refer to the concentric waves that radiate outward as the initiate emerges from the river to take her place as a member of the adult community.

**BWAMI ASSOCIATION AMONG THE LEGA** A ceremony of initiation may also accompany the achievement of other types of membership. Among the Lega people, who live in the dense forests between the headwaters of the Congo River and the great lakes of east Africa, the political system is based on a voluntary association called *bwami*, which comprises six levels or grades. Some 80 percent of Lega men belong to *bwami*, and all aspire to the highest grade. Women can also belong to *bwami*, although not at a higher grade than their husbands.

Promotion from one grade of *bwami* to the next takes many years. It is based not only on a candidate's character but also on his or her ability to pay the initiation fees, which increase dramatically with each grade. No candidate for any level of *bwami* can pay the fees without assistance and must enlist the help of relatives to

provide the necessary payment, which may include cowrie shells, goats, wild game, palm oil, clothing, and trade goods. Thus, the ambition to move from one level of *bwami* to the next encourages a harmonious community, for all must stay on good terms with other members of the community if they are to advance.

*Bwami* initiations into advanced grades are held in the plaza at the center of the community in the presence of all members.



**29-8 • BWAMI MASK (LUKWAKONGO)**

Democratic Republic of Congo. 20th century. Wood, plant fiber, and pigment, height 22¾" (57.5 cm). Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California in Los Angeles.

Dances and songs are performed, and the values and ideals of the appropriate grade are explained through proverbs and sayings. These standards are illustrated by natural or crafted objects, which are presented to the initiate as signs of membership. At the highest two levels of *bwami*, such objects include exquisitely made small masks and sculpted figures.

The mask in **FIGURE 29-8** is associated with *yananio*, the second-highest grade of *bwami*. Typical of Lega masks, the head is fashioned as an oval into which is carved a concave, heart-shaped face with narrow, raised features. The masks are often colored white with clay and fitted with a long beard made of plant fibers. Too small to cover the face, they are displayed in other ways—held in the palm of a hand, for example, or attached to a thigh. Each means of display recalls a different value or saying, so that one mask may convey a variety of meanings. Generally, the masks symbolize continuity between the ancestors and the living community and are thought to be direct links to deceased relatives and past members of *bwami*.

**KIKAKU OF THE NKANU PEOPLES** During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Nkanu peoples residing in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola celebrated the completion of coming-of-age initiation rites (*nkanda*) by creating brightly painted figurative sculpture and decorated wall panels adorned with human and animal figures, displayed in a *kikaku*—a three-sided roofed enclosure built at a crossroads near the initiation campground. These displays reinforced the values taught during *nkanda* and announced to the community that initiation was coming to a close—that their children would soon be home.

The *kikaku* resembled a stage. Wall panels were carved, painted, and attached to its back and sides, and sculpted figures were placed in front of the wall panels on the floor of the structure. The *kikaku* wall panels were brightly colored with symbolically charged patterns that conveyed specific meanings associated with the initiation ritual (**FIG. 29-9**). European colonial officials were a favorite subject. Their depictions were considered “portraits” of specific individuals, included distinguishing characteristics such as costume and hairstyle—often ridiculing officials who were despised for their cruelty or because of their dalliances with Nkanu women. These caricatures became a means of confronting colonial domination without openly attacking colonial officials, which would have undoubtedly led to severe repercussions.

The wall panels here depict a central colonial administrator flanked by two figures representing Congolese men who served in the Force Publique, the Belgian colonial military force. One soldier wears an ammunition belt, while the other assumes the awkward stance of an initiate, required to balance on one leg. Both the stance and the painted patterns on the panels symbolize the virility and procreative capacity of the initiate upon the successful completion of *nkanda*. After the initiation sequence, the *kikaku* and its contents were left to decay. A few individual pieces—but no entire *kikaku*—have been acquired by Western museums.





### 29-9 • INITIATION WALL PANELS

Democratic Republic of Congo. Nkanu peoples, Kimvula region, early 20th century. Wood, pigment, height 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (84.8 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Museum purchase (99-2-1)

## THE SPIRIT WORLD

While African religious beliefs have been influenced by Christianity and Islam for hundreds of years, many African peoples still rely on local customs and belief systems to find the answers to universal human problems. Why does one child fall ill and die while another remains healthy? Why does one year bring rain and a bountiful crop, while the next brings drought and famine? People everywhere confront these fundamental and troubling questions. In many African belief systems, a supreme creator god is not thought to be fundamentally involved in the daily lives of humans. Instead, numerous subordinate spirit forces are believed to be ever-present and involved in human affairs. For instance, such spirits may inhabit agricultural fields, the river that provides fish, the forest that is home to game, or the land that must be cleared in order to build a new village. Families, too, may acknowledge the existence of ancestral spirits. These spirits control success and failure in life, and if a proper relationship is not maintained with them, harm in the form of illness or misfortune can befall an individual, a family, or an entire community.

**NKISI NKONDE OF THE KONGO** To communicate with these all-important spirits, many African societies rely on a specialist, such as a diviner who serves as a link between the supernatural and human worlds, opening the lines of communication through such techniques as prayer, sacrifice, offerings, ritual performance, and divination. Sometimes art plays a role in the diviner's dealings with the spirit world, giving visible identity and personality to what is imaginary and intangible (see "Divination Among the Chokwe," page 893). *Minkisi* (the plural of *Nkisi*, a Kikongo word meaning "container") are objects harnessing spirit forces or powers, and were made by the Kongo and Songye peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo, primarily during the nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries, to alleviate illness, protect vulnerable individuals, and bring success in hunting, trade, and other endeavors. The more specialized *Nkisi Nkonde* object served a divinatory and judicial function to seek out wrongdoers and punish them for their misdeeds (see "A Closer Look," page 894). A *Nkisi Nkonde* began as an unadorned wooden figure, often in human or animal form. It was commissioned by a diviner or chief



on behalf of his society if it had encountered some adversity. The diviner prescribed medicinal ingredients (*bilongo*) from the plant, animal, and mineral worlds, which activated the object with potent earthly and supernatural powers. A *Nkisi Nkonde* served an important public function as an impartial arbiter of justice in smaller villages where European colonial rule had removed local judicial authorities to the capital cities. Two warring rural communities, for example, might agree to end their conflict by swearing an oath of peace and then driving a nail into the *Nkisi Nkonde* to seal the agreement. Should either party break the oath, it was believed that the *Nkisi Nkonde* would avenge the wronged party by meting out an appropriate punishment to the offender.



**29-10 • SPIRIT SPOUSE (BLOLE BLA)**

Ivory Coast. Baule culture, early-mid 20th century. Wood, glass beads, gold hollow beads, plant fiber, white pigment, encrustation, height 19¼" (48.9 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Museum purchase (85-15-2)

**SPIRIT SPOUSE OF THE BAULE** Some African peoples conceive of the spirit world as a parallel realm in which spirits may have families, live in villages, attend markets, and possess personalities, complete with faults and virtues. The Baule people in the Ivory Coast believe that each of us lived in the spirit world before we were born. While there, we had a spirit spouse, whom we left behind when we entered this life. A person who has difficulty assuming his or her gender-specific role as an adult Baule—a man who has not married or achieved his expected status in life, for example, or a woman who has not borne children—may dream of his or her spirit spouse.

For such a person, the diviner may prescribe the carving of an image of the **SPIRIT SPOUSE (FIG. 29-10)**—a *blole bla* (other-world wife) for a man, or a *blole bian* (otherworld husband) for a woman. The figures display the most admired and desirable marks of beauty so that the spirit spouses may be encouraged to enter and inhabit them. Spirit spouse figures are broadly naturalistic, with swelling, fully rounded musculature and careful attention to details of hairstyle, jewelry, and scarification patterns. They may be carved standing in a quiet, dignified pose or seated on a stool. The owner keeps the figure in his or her room, dressing it in beautiful textiles and jewelry, washing it, anointing it with oil, feeding it, and caressing it. Over time, the surface of the figure softens as it takes on a glossy sheen indicating the attention it has been given. The Baule hope that by caring for and pleasing his or her spirit spouse a balance may be restored that will free the individual's human life to unfold smoothly.

**YORUBA DIVINATION** While spirit beings are often portrayed in African art, major deities are generally considered to be far removed from the everyday lives of humans and are thus rarely depicted. Such is the case with Olodumare, the creator god of the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

The Yoruba have a sizable pantheon of lesser, but still important, gods (*orisha*). Two *orisha* are principal mediators: Orunmila who represents certainty, fate, order, and equilibrium; and his counterpart Eshu who represents uncertainty, disorder, and chance. Commonly represented in art, Eshu is a capricious and mischievous trickster who loves nothing better than to disrupt things that appear to be going well. The opposing forces of order and disorder are mediated through the agency of a diviner (*babalawo*) who employs a divination board (*opon ifa*) and its paraphernalia to reveal the causes of a client's problems (**FIG. 29-11**). The divination board is sprinkled with a white wood dust and the *orisha* Orunmila and Eshu are called to the divination by tapping the board with a special tapper. The *babalawo* throws 16 palm nuts and after each toss records the way the palm nuts have landed in the white wood dust on the divination board. Each configuration of the palm nuts relates to particular verses from a complex oral tradition also known as Ifa. As the selected verses are recited by the diviner, the client relates the verses to his or her own particular problems or concerns.





### 29-11 • IFA DIVINATION SESSION

Yoruba culture, Nigeria, 1982. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal Collection (EEPA 1992-028-02016)

Eshu's image often appears on divination objects and in shrines employed by his worshipers. His image always appears at the top of the divination board, while other images along the edge of the board relate symbolically to the world of Ifa divination. Eshu is associated with two eternal sources of human conflict—sex and money—and is usually portrayed with a long hairstyle: The Yoruba consider long hair to represent excess libidinous energy and unrestrained sexuality. Figures of Eshu are usually adorned with long strands of cowrie shells, a traditional African currency. Shrines to him are erected wherever there is the potential for encounters that lead to conflict, especially at crossroads, in markets, or in front of banks. Eshu's followers hope their offerings will persuade the god to spare them the pitfalls he places in front of others.

### LEADERSHIP

As in societies throughout the world, art in Africa is used to identify those who hold power, to validate their right to their authority as representatives of the family or community, and to communicate the rules for moral behavior that must be obeyed by all members

of the society. This chapter opened with one example—a gold-and-wood spokesman's staff (see FIG. 29-1) from the culture of the Ashanti of Ghana, in west Africa. The Ashanti greatly admire fine language—one of their adages is, “We speak to the wise man in proverbs, not in plain speech”—and consequently their governing system includes the special post of spokesman to the ruler.

The Ashanti use gold not only for objects, such as the staff, that are reserved for the use of rulers, but also for jewelry, as do other peoples of the region. But for the Ashanti, who live in the middle of the richest goldfields of west Africa, gold was long a major source of power; for centuries they traded it, first via intermediaries across the Sahara to the Mediterranean world, then later directly to Europeans on the west African coast.

**KENTE CLOTH** The Ashanti are also renowned for the beauty of their woven textiles (**kente**) (FIG. 29-13). Weaving was introduced in Ghana sometime during the seventeenth century from neighboring regions of west Africa. Ashanti weavers—traditionally men—work on small, light, horizontal looms that produce long, narrow strips of cloth that are subsequently sewn together to form large rectangles of finished *kente* cloth. Weavers begin by laying out the long warp threads in brightly colored stripes. Today the threads are likely to be rayon. Formerly, however, they were cotton and later silk, which the Ashanti first procured in the seventeenth century by unraveling silk cloth obtained through European trade. Weft threads are woven through the warp to produce complex patterns. The example shown belongs to a type known as *faprenu*, with a dense double weave consisting of twice as many weft threads as warp threads.

*Kente* cloth was originally associated with royalty and produced under royal control. A man wore a single piece, about 6–7 feet by 12–13 feet, wrapped like a toga, with no belt and the right shoulder bare. Women wore two pieces—a skirt and a shawl. Even though its use is now more widespread, *kente* cloth is primarily reserved for festive attire worn at special occasions. The pattern in FIGURE 29-13 is known as *Oyokoman Adweneasa*, characterized by wide gold and green stripes set on deep red grounds. *Oyokoman* refers to the powerful Oyoka clan, and *Adweneasa* means “my skill is exhausted,” a reference to the way the artist has woven elaborate patterns into every available area to the very edge of the fabric, until running out of space.

**THE KUBA NYIM** The Kuba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo also relate art and leadership. At the pinnacle of the political hierarchy sits the Kuba paramount ruler (*nyim*) whose residence was located approximately in the center of the Kuba region. The current *nyim* can trace his predecessors back to the founding of the kingdom in the seventeenth century. At the installation of a new monarch, a new capital city (*Nsheng*) is built that includes the residence of the *nyim* and his wives and children, as well as areas for other governmental functions, all surrounded by a high palisade.



Chokwe peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola consult diviners (*nganga*) about problems such as death, illness, impotence, sterility, and theft. As the mediator between this world and the supernatural, the diviner's role is to ascertain the true meaning and underlying cause of an affliction or misfortune, and whether it is due to a conflict with human protagonists or with spirit forces. The diviner's ability to uncover the cause of a client's problems comes through the agency of powerful spirit forces and the efficacy of divinatory paraphernalia. A Chokwe *nganga*, utilizing a rattle to call the spirits to the divination, begins to shake a shallow covered basket (*ngombo ya kusekula*) (FIG. 29-12) containing a variety of natural objects including small antelope horns, seeds, and minerals. The basket also contains a number of carved wooden objects representing humans (in various symbolic poses), animals, and other objects such as small models of masks and masked figures. The objects in the basket are tossed about as the basket is shaken and when finished the cover is removed to reveal the arrangement of the objects as they came to rest inside. The *nganga* interprets the results of multiple tosses to disclose the underlying cause of the client's problem and suggests what steps need to be taken to remedy the situation.

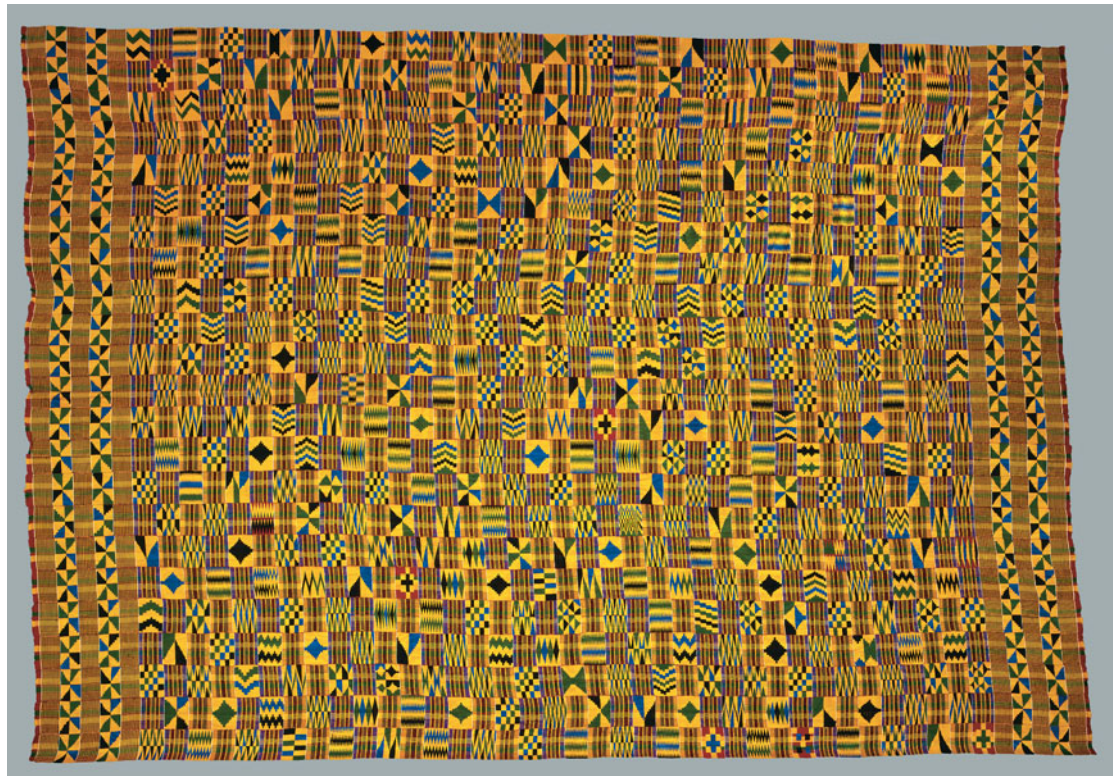
#### 29-12 • DIVINATION BASKET (NGOMBO)

Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. Chokwe peoples, mid 19th–early 20th century. Plant fiber, seed, stone, horn, shell, bone, metal, feather, and camwood, depth 12 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (30.7 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Museum purchase (86-12-17.1)



#### 29-13 • KENTE CLOTH

Ghana. Ashanti culture, c. 1980. Rayon, 10'3 $\frac{1}{2}$ " × 7'1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (3.14 × 2.17 m). Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California in Los Angeles.





## A CLOSER LOOK | Kongo *Nkisi Nkonde*

### Power Figure (*Nkisi Nkonde*).

From the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kongo culture, 19th century. Wood, nails, pins, blades, and other materials, height 44" (111.7 cm). The Field Museum, Chicago.

The *bilongo* (medicinal ingredients) may be placed on the head of the figure, thought to be an especially appropriate site to communicate with spirit forces.

Clients drive a nail, blade, or other pointed object into the figure to capture the *Nkonde*'s attention and prick it into action. The large number of objects driven into this *Nkonde* suggests that its powers were both formidable and efficacious.

This *Nkonde* stands in a pose called *pakalala*, a stance of alertness like that of a wrestler challenging an opponent. Other *Nkonde* figures hold a knife or spear in an upraised hand, ready to strike or attack.



*Bilongo* may also be suspended in a packet from the figure's neck or waist or even placed into the figure's beard. The beard is associated with the powers that come with age and seniority.

Additional *bilongo* are inserted into a body cavity such as the figure's belly, as this is thought to be the seat of a person's life or soul. The term *mooyo* means both "belly" and "life."

 [View the Closer Look for the Kongo \*Nkisi Nkonde\* on myartslab.com](#)

Powerful individuals often lavish elaborate surface decoration on objects that belong to them to indicate their rank and prestige within the political and social hierarchy. In Kuba culture this happens with geometric decoration—woven on the walls of royal buildings (FIG. 29-14) and intricately carved on wooden drums, boxes, and other objects. It is also seen on the lavishly embroidered textiles for men and women and on regalia such as headdresses and jewelry that serve as prestige and festive attire for celebratory occasions. An eagle feather chief (*kum apoong*) displays sumptuous adornment at his investiture. Each

element of regalia signifies a prerogative of an individual's titled position relative to the position of others within a complicated system of titleholding. Naturally the most extravagant adornment is worn by the paramount ruler, as can be seen in a photograph of the Kuba *nyim* taken in 1971 (FIG. 29-15). Textile display is also an essential aspect of funeral rituals where textiles are worn at celebratory dances and displayed on the body of the deceased. The textiles are subsequently buried in the deceased's grave, where the Kuba believe an individual remains for a period of time before being reborn.





**29-14 • DECORATED BUILDING (SLEEPING ROOM FOR NYIM) IN THE ROYAL COMPOUND OF THE KUBA NYIM**  
Nsheng, Democratic Republic of Congo. 1980.

 **Watch** an architectural simulation about Kuba woven decoration on walls on [myartslab.com](http://myartslab.com)


**YORUBA PALACE ART** The kings of the Yoruba people of Nigeria also manifested their authority and power through the large palaces in which they lived. In a typical palace plan, the principal rooms opened onto a veranda with elaborately carved posts facing a courtyard (FIG. 29-16). Elaborate carving also covered the palace doors. Among the most important Yoruba artists of the early twentieth century was Olowe of Ise (d. 1938), who carved doors and veranda posts for the rulers of the Ekiti-Yoruba kingdoms in southwestern Nigeria.



**29-15 • KOT AMBWEK IN CEREMONIAL DRESS**  
Democratic Republic of Congo. Photograph 1971. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. (EEPA EECL 2145)



**29-16 • Olowe of Ise VERANDA POSTS INSTALLED IN THE COURTYARD OF THE PALACE OF THE OGAGA OF IKERE**  
Nigeria. Yoruba culture, c. 1910–1914. Wood and pigment. Photograph 1964.

 **Read** the document related to Olowe of Ise on [myartslab.com](http://myartslab.com)



## A BROADER LOOK | Kuba Funerary Mask

The Kuba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo perform funerary masquerades to honor deceased members of the men's initiation society and high-ranking individuals who belonged to the community council of elders.

In the southern Kuba region, funeral rites for initiated men are often accompanied by the appearance of one or more masquerade figures on the day of interment of the deceased. On these occasions, initiation society members and family and friends of the deceased celebrate the departed's life while mourning his death. In part, funeral rites are elaborate because of the belief that the spirit of the recently deceased (*mwendu*) may bring harm to his family or community if his achievements and status in life are not acknowledged at the funeral. The *mwendu* may be angered for a variety of reasons. Perhaps outstanding debts were not paid and money or other goods were kept back by a family member. Or the deceased had asked for something to be buried with him and this request was not honored. Disrespect is most often shown if the deceased is not given a proper burial, one equal to his rank in life. For an initiated man, a funeral masquerade is mandatory in this region, and members of the community-based men's initiation society show their solidarity with the deceased and his spirit by performing a masquerade at his funeral.

Among the most spectacular masquerades performed in the Kuba region is that of *Ngady mwaash*—the name means literally “female mask” (FIG. 29-17). The mask is carved from wood, and attached to a framework covered with cloth and decorated with beads and shells that forms the top, sides, and back of the head.

Wooden ears, carved separately, are attached to the sides of the head. The face of the mask presents an exuberant blend of bold geometric patterns composed of contrasting areas of triangles and parallel lines. A triangular-shaped hat, identical to that worn by female diviners, is attached to the mask. The hat signifies that *Ngady mwaash* is invested with the power of nature spirits (*ngesh*) to whom Kuba diviners attribute their extraordinary powers.

The costume for *Ngady mwaash* is composed of a shirt and leggings made from animal hide or cloth, often extensively

decorated with painted black-and-white triangles. Small wooden dowels attached to the front of the shirt represent breasts. Although wearing a woman's long embroidered skirt under a short decorated skirt affixed with a belt, *Ngady mwaash* is always performed by a man. Costume accessories include strands of beaded and shell-laden bandoliers that crisscross the chest and decorated arm- and legbands. The mask, costume, and accessories, as well as the fly-whisk that *Ngady mwaash* carries, represent wealth and high status.



**29-17 • NGADY MWAASH MASK**  
Democratic Republic of Congo. Kuba peoples, late 19th–mid 20th century. Wood, pigment, glass beads, cowrie shells, fabric, and thread, height 12½" (31.8 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago. (1982.1505)



**29-18 • BWOOM MASKED DANCER  
AT THE FUNERAL OF AN INITIATED  
MAN**

Democratic Republic of Congo. Southern Kuba  
peoples, 1982.

The funeral masquerade performance is held near the residence of the man who has died, just prior to burial. The perimeter of the dance ground is lined with family, friends, and onlookers who have come to bid a final farewell to the deceased and witness the performance. *Ngady mwaash* takes turns performing with another masked figure designated as male, such as the masked figure *Bwoom*.

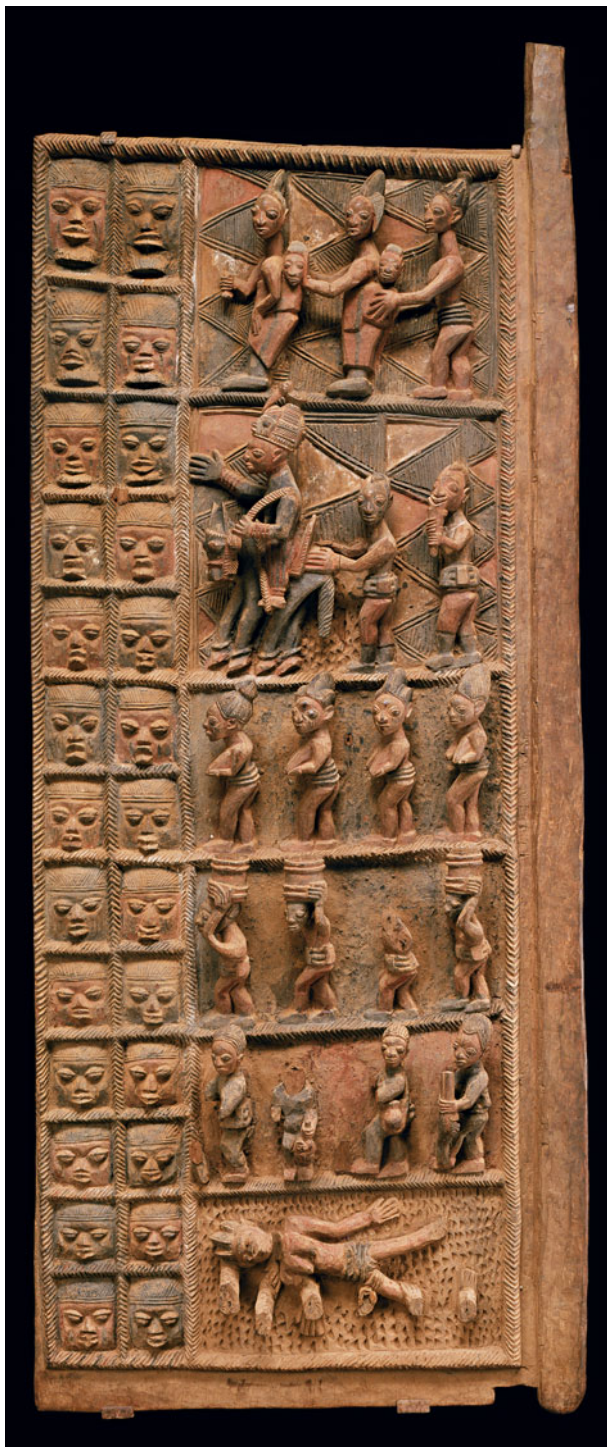
The individual character or persona of male and female masked figures is fully realized during performance. *Bwoom*, who carries a short sword, exudes power and restrained aggression. The dancer employs lunging movements and quick short jabs with his sword, causing onlookers to suspect that he may suddenly lose control and harm someone. This feeling of apprehension is a constituent part of the performance style of *Bwoom*, and is a principal reason why community members look forward to masquerade with such anticipation. In contrast, the performance style of *Ngady mwaash* is decidedly nonthreatening, with graceful movements as the dancer's body, legs, arms, and hands move in fluid gestures. The differences in the performance styles of male and female masquerade figures parallel the difference in the dance styles of men and women in Kuba culture. The men's initiation society, which organizes funeral masquerades, expresses its control and dominance of ritual affairs in part through the contrasting performance styles of *Bwoom* and *Ngady mwaash* (FIGS. 29-18, 29-19).



**29-19 • NGADY MWAASH MASKED  
DANCER AT THE FUNERAL OF AN  
INITIATED MAN**

Democratic Republic of Congo. Southern Kuba  
peoples, 1982.





## 29-20 • Olowe of Ise PALACE DOOR

From the palace at Ise, Nigeria, Yoruba culture, c. 1904–1910. Wood and pigment, height 81½" × width 34⅝" × depth 6¼" (207 × 88 × 15.9 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Dr. and Mrs Robert Kuhn (88-13-1)

Olowe carved the door panel for the royal palace at Ise (FIG. 29-20) as an asymmetrical composition, combining narrative and symbolic scenes in horizontal rectangular panels. Tall figures with bodies in profile turn their heads outward to confront the viewer. Their long necks and elaborate hairstyles make them appear even taller, unlike typical Yoruba sculpture which uses short, static

figures. The relief is so high that the figures' upper portions are actually carved in the round. The energetic movement of the figures is set against an underlying decorative pattern. The entire surface of the doors was originally painted, but only traces of the original colors remain.

This door panel commemorates the *arinjale* (king) of Ise's reception of Major W.R. Reeve-Tucker, the first British traveling commissioner for the province, and his entourage. A separate door panel, in a private collection, presents the European entourage. In the second register of this panel, the *arinjale* appears on horseback wearing a conical crown and accompanied by court messengers. Other registers contain other members of the court—royal wives lifting their breasts (a gesture of generosity and affection performed by elder women), men carrying kegs of gunpowder, royal guards, and priests. The bottom register portrays a human sacrifice, with birds pecking at the corpse, and the two rows of heads on the left side of the panel may represent either ancestors of the *arinjale* or enemies taken in battle.

Olowe seems to have worked from the early 1900s until his death in 1938. Although he was famous throughout Yorubaland and called upon by patrons as distant as 60 miles from his home, few records of his activities remain, and only one European, Philip Allison, wrote of meeting him and watching him work. Allison described Olowe carving the iron-hard African oak "as easily as [he would] a calabash [gourd]."

## DEATH AND ANCESTORS

In the view of many African peoples, death is not an end but a transition—the leaving behind of one phase of life and the beginning of another. Just as ceremonies mark the initiation of young men and women into the community of adults, so too they mark the initiation of the newly dead into the community of spirits. Like

the rites of initiation into adulthood, death begins with a separation from the community, in this case the community of the living. A period of isolation and trial follows, during which the newly dead spirit may, for example, journey to the land of ancestors. Finally, the deceased is reintegrated into a community, this time the community of ancestral spirits. The living who preserve the memory of the deceased may appeal to his or her spirit to intercede on their behalf with nature spirits or to prevent the spirits of the dead from using their powers to harm (see "Kuba Funerary Mask," page 896).



**DOGON FUNERARY DAMA** Among the Dogon people of Mali, in west Africa, a collective funeral rite called *dama*, is held every 12 to 13 years (FIG. 29–21). During *dama*, a variety of different masks perform to the sound of gunfire to drive the souls of the deceased from the village. Among the most common masks to perform is the *kanaga*, whose rectangular face supports a superstructure of planks that depict a woman, bird, or lizard with splayed legs.

For a deceased man, men from the community later engage in a mock battle on the roof of his home and participate in ritual hunts; for a deceased woman, the women of the community smash her cooking vessels on the threshold of her home. These portions of *dama* are reminders of human activities the deceased will no longer engage in. The *dama* may last as long as six days and include the performance of hundreds of masks. Because a *dama* is so costly, it is performed for several deceased elders at the same time. However, in certain Dogon communities frequented by tourists, *dama* performances have become more frequent as new masked characters are invented, including masks representing

tourists holding wooden cameras or anthropologists holding notebooks in their hands. Dogon mask-makers produce additional masks that are offered for sale to tourists at the conclusion of the performance.

**FANG ANCESTOR GUARDIAN** The Fang, along with other peoples who live near the Atlantic coast from southern Cameroon through Rio Muni and into Gabon, shared a number of similar institutions and beliefs in which the skulls, bones, and relics of ancestors who had performed great deeds during their lifetimes were collected after burial and placed in a cylindrical bark container (*nsek-bieri*), which was preserved by the family. Deeds thus honored included victory in warfare, killing an elephant, being the first to trade with Europeans, bearing an especially large number of children, or founding a particular lineage or community. The bones and relics of deceased family members were thought to have special powers that could be drawn upon to aid the living with problems that confronted or threatened the family. Before colonial officials banned many ritual practices, ancestral spirits



**29–21 • KANAGA AND RABBIT MASQUERADE FIGURES AT DAMA**

Mali. Dogon culture, 1959. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. (EEPA 3502)





**29-22 • RELIQUARY GUARDIAN (EYEMA BIERI)**

Gabon. Fang people, Mvai group, mid-late 19th century. Wood, metal, and shell, height 21¼" (53.97 cm). Dallas Museum of Art. The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc. (2000.3.MCD)

One authority on Fang culture suggests that *bieri* aim to achieve a balance between the opposing forces of chaos and order, male and female, pure and impure, powerful and weak. The Fang value an attitude of quiet composure, of reflection and tranquility—qualities embodied in the symmetry of the *bieri*, which communicates the calm and wisdom of the ancestor while also instilling awe and fear in those not initiated into the Fang religion.

represented by the reliquaries were regularly consulted on problems with fertility—failure in conceiving and bringing to term children—or with hunting and farming, or before embarking on a commercial venture.

As a point of focus for mediation between the ancestors and the living, the Fang placed a wooden sculpture called an *eyema bieri* on top of the container holding the relics. These sculptures functioned as points of contact for ancestral support and veneration and also as guardians to protect the relics from malevolent spirit forces (FIG. 29-22).

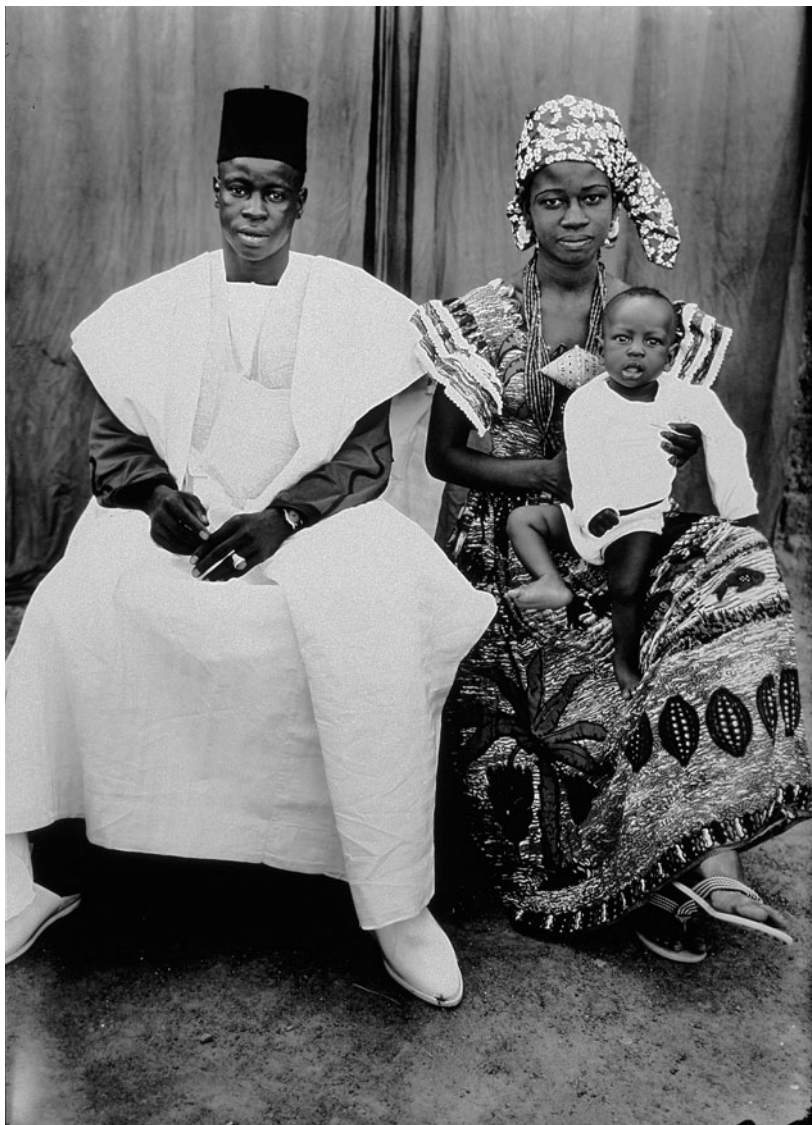
*Bieri* were carved in a number of different forms and styles. Some are large heads with long necks that are secured into the lid of the container, which represents the ancestral body. Other *bieri* were created as full figures with carefully arranged hairstyles, fully rounded torsos, and heavily muscled legs and arms. Here, the figure's firmly set jaw and powerfully built, muscular body exudes a sense of authority and confidence. These powerfully realized sculptures were often enhanced by the frequent application of cleansing and purifying palm oil over an extended period of time, producing a rich, glossy black surface that may literally exude oil.

## CONTEMPORARY ART

The photographs of rituals and ceremonies in this chapter show ways in which African traditional arts have continued during the modern era. All of the photographs are somewhat dated, yet even today performances are staged in which the traditional types of masks appear. But Africa is ever-changing, and, as new experiences pose new challenges and offer new opportunities, African art moves with the times.

Perhaps the most obvious modern development in African art has been the adaptation of new materials to traditional forms. Some Yoruba, for example, have used photographs and children's brightly colored, imported plastic dolls in place of the traditional *ere ibeji*, images of twins, shown in FIGURE 29-4. The Guro people of Ivory Coast continue to commission delicate masks dressed with costly textiles and other materials, but they enliven them with brilliantly colored oil-based enamel paints. The Baule create brightly painted versions of spirit-spouse figures dressed as businessmen or soccer players.

Throughout the colonial period and especially during the years following World War II, many African artists trained in the techniques of European art. In the postcolonial era, numerous African artists have studied in Europe and the United States, and many have become internationally renowned through exhibitions of their work in galleries and museums around the world. Yet the diversity of influences on contemporary Africa makes it impossible to render a homogeneous view of what constitutes contemporary African art. As the art historian and curator Salah Hassan writes: "The development of a modern idiom in African art is closely linked to modern Africa's search for identity. Most contemporary works have apparent ties to traditional African folklore, belief



**29-23 • Seydou Keita UNTITLED**

1952–1955. Gelatin-silver print, 24" × 20" (61 × 50.8 cm). Edition of ten.

Seydou Keita said about his work, "It's easy to take a photo, but what really made a difference was that I always knew how to find the right position, and I never was wrong. Their head slightly turned, a serious face, the position of the hands ... I was capable of making someone look really good. The photos were always very good. That's why I always say that it's a real art."

systems and imagery. The only way to interpret or understand these works is in the light of the dual experience of colonialism and assimilation into Western culture in Africa. They reflect the search for a new identity."

**SEYDOU KEÏTA OF MALI** Photography was among earliest modern art media to be embraced broadly in Africa, and Seydou Keita (c. 1921–2001) has become one of the best-known photographers. Trained as a carpenter, Keita's interest in photography was serendipitously sparked by his uncle's gift of a Kodak Brownie Flash camera in 1935, and after using this unassuming equipment to hone his craft, he acquired a large-format camera and in 1948 opened his own studio in his hometown of Bamako, Mali. There

he specialized as a portraitist, taking unidealized and engaging photographs of the proud people of this newly independent nation. He was among the first to portray his own nation and people as prosperous and urban rather than objectified as ethnographic subjects, as seen in magazines such as *National Geographic*. In the image shown here (FIG. 29-23), the sitters occupy a visually luxurious space but are not confined by it. The heavy, strong patterns of the wife's clothing contrast with the stark white worn by her husband and child. Keita's elegant composition monumentalizes individuals whose power and pride are communicated through their commanding poses and relaxed gestures. The sitters look out of the photograph with disarming frankness, inviting and returning our gaze, demanding that we see them as real people, as equals, with identities as multivalent and as complex as our own. While Keita made his photographs for domestic consumption (his studio archive comprised over 10,000 negatives), he was "discovered" by the Western art world during the 1990s and is frequently exhibited in Europe and the United States.

**EL ANATSUI OF GHANA** The complex, multimedia work of El Anatsui affirms Africa's rich legacy with unexpected materials. Born in Ghana in 1944, Anatsui studied art in Kumasi where he took course work he describes as predominantly Western in orientation, while Ghana's own rich legacy was ignored. Following his own inclinations, he began to study Ghanaian surface design traditions as produced by Ewe and Ashanti textile artists. In 1975, Anatsui took a position in the Fine Arts Department of the University of Nigeria at Nsukka. There he found a like-minded spirit in Uche Okeke, who was intensely interested in revitalizing *uli*, an important Igbo surface design system. Anatsui began to create what would become a large body of work inspired by *uli* and other graphic systems using tools such as chain saws and blow-

torches. More recently, while still concerned with the survival and transmission of inherited traditions, Anatsui began to appropriate cast-off objects he found in and around Nsukka, including broken and discarded mortars, large coconut graters, liquor-bottle caps, and aluminum labels from whiskey bottles to create revelatory art forms in a variety of media. These include immense wall sculptures that fold and undulate like textiles but are made from metal sewn together with copper wire (FIG. 29-24).

Although he lives in Nigeria, El Anatsui, like many contemporary African artists, also participates in international art events—including workshops, symposia, biennial exhibitions, and art festivals that dramatically invigorate our global visual culture. On the other hand, many other African artists have moved





**29-24 • El Anatsui**  
**FLAG FOR A NEW**  
**WORLD POWER**  
 2004. Found aluminum  
 and copper wire, 16'4"  
 × 14'9" (5 × 4.5 m).  
 Private collection.

permanently to major European and American cities, which offer them increased opportunities for exposure to art dealers, museum curators, art critics, and the expanding base of public and private collectors of African contemporary art.

**AFRICAN ARTISTS IN DIASPORA** While many African artists are primarily influenced by their own culture and traditions, others—especially some who no longer live on the continent—seem entirely removed from African stylistic influences and yet still express the search for a new African identity in revelatory ways. Their experiences of movement, accommodation, and change often become important elements in their art making and form an additional basis for the interpretation of their work.

Julie Mehretu (FIG. 29-25) is an eminent example of this kind of artist. Born in Ethiopia in 1970, but having lived in Senegal and the United States, and now in New York City, Mehretu

makes intensely energetic large-scale paintings and wall drawings. Her works speak not only to her own history of movement and change, but also to the transnational movement of myriad others uprooted by choice or by force as they create new identities in this increasingly turbulent period of globalization and change.

The underpinnings of her intricately layered canvases are architectural plans of airports, passenger terminals, and other places where people congregate and pass through during their lives. Layered and at times obscuring these architectural elements is an immense inventory of signs and markings influenced by cartography, weather maps, Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, tattooing, graffiti, and various stylized forms suggesting smoke and explosions borrowed from cartoons, comic books, and anime. The ambiguous reading of the paintings as either implosion and chaos or explosion and regeneration gives the works visual and conceptual complexity. Mehretu explains that she is not interested in





**29-25 • Julie Mehretu DISPERSION**

2002. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 90" × 144" (228.6 × 365.8 cm). Collection of Nicolas and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, New York.

 **Watch** a video about Julie Mehretu on myartslab.com

describing or mapping specific locations but “in the multi-faceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and communal identity.” Mehretu’s concerns echo those of

other contemporary African artists whose identification with the continent becomes increasingly complex as they move from Africa and enter a global arena.

## THINK ABOUT IT

- 29.1** Compare the representation of the human figure in FIGURES 29-10 and 29-22. How could the differences in style be related to the function of these two works and their origin in distinct cultures?
- 29.2** Explain the use of art during African divination rituals and discuss one work from the chapter that is used in the practice.
- 29.3** Explain the role of masquerade in African art by analyzing the rite-of-passage ceremony of the Bwa culture in Burkina Faso.
- 29.4** Analyze the initiation wall panels shown in FIGURE 29-9 and discuss how the artist addresses the experience of colonialism.

## CROSSCURRENTS



FIG. 28-19



FIG. 29-23

How do these two photographers from Samoa and Mali—whose work has received attention and acclaim within a contemporary global art world—address the specific concerns of their own cultural situation and at the same time evoke concerns shared by people around the world?

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